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AUTHOR Banks, Dennis
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on field research conducted by students in undergraduate methods courses for secondary social studies in 1996-97. Journal entries, lesson plans, oral history reactions, and interviews were used to gather data. Objectives were: to describe the role of the interviewer in an oral history setting; and to identify and clarify the multiple dimensions of reflection present in the interviewer. Students are seen as going through the complete "circle of life" as described by J. Bruchac's use of the Native American metaphor of the story circle. The key markers of the circle include: (1) child (when we listen to the stories being told); (2) adolescent (when we observe the context in which the stories are revealed); (3) adult (when we remember the stories that were told in our youth); and (4) elder (when we share the stories we have learned). These four markers become the four themes used to describe the data: stage 1--child (where the interview takes place and data is collected; stage 2--adolescent (when the information of the interview is put into various contextual frames; stage 3--adult (when the information is compared with other types of data on the same period); and stage 4--elder (when the information is written up and shared with an audience). The study uses specific interviews to explain each of the stages and shares field notes of the students. (EH)

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"The impact of oral history on the interviewer: a study of novice historians"

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Dennis Banks, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Social Science Education
334 Fitzelle Hall
SUNY Oneonta
Oneonta, NY 13820

607-436-3391
607-436-2554 (fax)

banksdn@oneonta.edu

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Abstract: Secondary social studies methods students participated in an oral history project as part of their coursework. This study used qualitative techniques to investigate the impact of such a project on the student interviewers. Students are seen as going through the complete "circle of life" as described by Bruchac.

I. Objectives
--To describe the role of interviewer in an oral history setting
--To identify and clarify the multiple dimensions of reflection present in the interviewer

II. Context

From Studs Terkel to the Delaney sisters, oral history has become a popular form of inquiry and provided the content for books and plays. These oral histories present richly detailed recollections of lives, events, relationships, communities, and cultures by those who might not be expected to write or to share their experiences. Through collecting and sharing oral histories, we can find unseen and unsung heroes and heroines. These are people who "break through" (Terkel, 1997, p. 2) in ways that might not be noticed or praised; people who are our family, our friends, our community: not necessarily those who are famous or powerful but those who are the true heroes and heroines of everyday life. Oral histories are both popular and powerful because "people are hungry for heroes in their communities, the hero in themselves" (Terkel, 1997, p. 2).

Like history, oral history is "illuminating the shadows" (Meltzer, 1994, p. xi). The process of illumination involves inquiry, memory, and creation of artful fact (story). Inquiry is a process of ordering facts, understanding context, and developing explanations; a process of evaluating and arranging information; a process of questioning what is worth knowing, who are reliable sources, what information is ignored or emphasized. Memory both clarifies and contextualizes an event. Both memory and inquiry combine to structure and create a milieu (settings and environments for personal events). The writing of history is the creation of "artful fact"; this process combines imagination, invention, and information to create a milieu and to people that milieu. This process does "illuminate the shadows" (Meltzer, 1994, p. xi) and shows the reader "people, people in trouble, people struggling against odds, people with fears and doubts and hopes and passions – people like themselves" (Meltzer, 1994, p. 35).

Oral history is the recollections and reminiscences of living people about their past. It is subject to all the vagaries and frailties of human recall; yet in that respect it is not substantially different from history as a whole. It is sometimes distorted and subjective, viewed through the lens of contemporary experience. It is history as primary sources with all the "warts, wrinkles, and inconsistencies" (Sitton, p. 4) intact. It is the history of the common person, the undocumented but not the inarticulate.

Oral history dates back to Herodotus, who worked mainly with

the personal recollections of living participants in the events he described. In modern times, with the advent of technology, an interest in this tradition was revived. No longer could we depend on personal letters and communications to provide the raw material for historians. The taped interview provided an alternative and much more. As historical studies were conducted with the formerly silent, the power and majesty of their stories came to the forefront. These stories have become popular reading material for the masses.

Why should we collect (and read) oral histories? Reading what others in a particular time or place said, felt, experienced gives us new perspectives on the world around us. By recreating an experience in their lives, we are able to connect with our own lives, noting similarities or differences. We are better able to reconstruct and understand for ourselves the milieu in which events transpired. We are able to construct a personal response.

Specifically, oral history is the collecting, telling, writing, and sharing of personal remembrances; descriptions of lives, events, communities. It is the recollections of living people about their past. It is subject to the frailties of human recall; it is sometimes distorted and subjective when viewed through the lens of contemporary experience. In this respect, it is not that different from history as a whole.

Above all, oral history is story; a story of the ordinary people, their struggles, their hopes, their joy, their sorrows, their families, their communities, their cultures, their nation, their world. As all stories, oral histories have heroes and heroines, but heroes and heroines who are ordinary citizens struggling with the dilemmas of everyday life. As all stories, oral histories influence those who collect, tell, and hear the stories. As all stories, oral histories have power; the power to entertain, to teach, and to heal. Native American storyteller Joseph Bruchac (1996) describes this power of stories as the finding of beauty, of balance in nature and in self. "We are human beings not just body and mind. We are also spirit and emotion. There are few things which speak as clearly as stories speak to the needed balance between all four of those components which make up human life" (1996, p.ix).

Turning students into oral historians is an activity being conducted across the country in ever increasing numbers. Students (generally middle and high school) are interviewing family members and neighbors on a wide variety of topics and themes. They are gathering information and compiling interesting arrays of data. Researchers are investigating the impact of this work on the historical understanding of the students and its overall pedagogical impact. (Stave & Banks)

Studies of the interviewing process include the work of Michael Frisch (1990), who promotes the notion that both participants in an interview are responsible for its creation and share its authorship. Interviewers may believe that they are a more than equal partner in this shared authority, since their questions shape the responses and they are extracting the raw

material of memory for use in scholarship. But interviewers are actually less than equal partners in the sense that the ultimate value of an oral history lies in the substance of the informant's story. Doing interviews is seen as raising curiosity about methodological and theoretical issues, since it soon becomes apparent that the interviewer is doing more than just collecting facts.

Several researchers have looked at the oral history interview as a tool of the postsecondary teacher as well (Grim, 1995; Forrest & Jackson, 1990). Students are seen as developing a broader understanding of the subject. They are able to improve their thinking, writing, and analytical skills. As Ritchie (1995) says, "Oral history challenges their preconceived notions and makes them rethink how they research and analyze." (182)

The study of history, as discussed in the National Standards (1994) involves "much more than the passive absorption of facts, dates, names, and places. Real historical understanding requires students to think through cause-and-effect relationships, to reach sound historical interpretations, and to conduct historical inquiries and research leading to the knowledge on which informed decisions in contemporary life can be based." (7)

One descriptor that continually appears in the research on student use of oral history is "empowerment." The question arises as to how the interview process empowers the interviewer. What are the dimensions of the role? How is the interviewer changed by the process?

III. Methodology

Students in undergraduate methods courses for secondary social studies participated in the project during the Spring semester of 1996 and 1997. The students were in the first half of their final year in the program. They were assigned to complete an oral history interview with someone from a culture other than their own. [The choice of topic/theme was made by the instructor in order to insure consistency and better meet the multicultural education needs of the students.] Students were required to locate their subject, devise a set of questions (though samples were provided), conduct the interview, and develop a potential lesson or lessons using whatever information they gathered. The lessons were not actually taught, but presented and discussed during a session of the methods course.

All students were required to keep a journal in the class, with specific entries concerning this assignment. They also wrote separate reaction papers after the group discussion and debriefing. Of the twenty participants, eight were subsequently interviewed to better determine their reactions and responses to the project. The interviews consisted of a series of open ended questions about the oral history project. Each participant was interviewed once, with the opportunity for follow up questions if necessary. The interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. The interviewer (another professor) had limited knowledge of the class project, had not met the students (except informally), and had

never been one of their instructors. The students who were interviewed were recommended by their course professor as articulate and representative of the class as a whole.

An additional source of data was the field notes of the course professor. These field notes included observations and reflections on the project presentations and subsequent discussion, as well as responses to journal entries and reaction papers.

The data were analyzed using the emerging themes approach. As themes emerged, it was determined that they could be described using the native American metaphor of the story circle as explained by Joseph Bruchac (1995). The circle includes four key markers:

--child (when we listen to the stories being told)
--adolescent (when we observe the context in which the stories are revealed)
--adult (when we remember the stories told in our youth)
--elder (when we share the stories we have learned).

These four markers become the four themes used to describe the data:

--stage 1--child (where the interview takes place and data is collected)
--stage 2--adolescent (when the information of the interview is put into various contextual frames)
--stage 3--adult (when the information is compared with other types of data on the same period)
--stage 4--elder (when the information is written up and shared with an audience).

IV. Cases

For the purposes of this paper, the responses of four students will be related. They include a male (Matt) in his early 30s who interviewed a Dutch WW II veteran, a male (Al) in his early 20s who interviewed a college student from Russia, a female (Sara) in her 40s who interviewed a Finnish emigre, and a male (Roy) in his mid 20s who interviewed a Chinese exchange student in her early 20s. The quotes included come from their journal entries, lesson plans, oral history reactions, and interviews. Comments from instructor/ research field notes follow. (All names have been changed to protect privacy.)

<u>Stage 1--Child (listening to stories)</u>

From his interview with an elderly Dutch war veteran, Matt came away feeling *"physically exhausted"* from the interviewing process. His main tip for future interviewers was to *"be prepared"* with lots of questions that you may never get to use. *"You have to be in touch with the person to communicate."* If they go off on a tangent, you have to go with them and eventually steer them back to your intended topics.

Al, in preparing for his interview with the Russian student had an agenda in mind. *"I made sure to develop many questions that would inquire about his perspective on issues in Soviet history."*

Though Sara may have been older and had a bit more experience working with people, she still found her interview with the Finnish

lady to be *"difficult."* On the positive side, she remarked that the close personal nature of the interview allowed her to *"read facial expressions between the phrases, that are not possible on tape."* The tape gave her the words and security, but not the nuances. She also noticed that *"there are topics that people don't want to discuss in other formats."*

Roy, on the other hand, used the experience to shape his questioning of the Chinese student:

> *In conducting this interview I learned many personal aspects of Chinese culture that would normally not be discussed in written form. The young lady brought a very personable attitude to the interview, making the conversation an enjoyable intellectual experience.*

Stage 2--Adolescent (observing context of story)

The adolescent phase of interviewing compares what was learned with what was previously known and seeks congruence and dissonance. The interviewers came across many areas where they were learning from their informants in a variety of areas, sometimes with surprising results.

For Matt it was content-related: *"I learned much about Holland during WW II and how he fought for the freedom of his homeland. I learned much about history from this man."*

Al discovered a personal side to modern political events:

> *These questions would determine (his) knowledge about his country's history and therefore determine how I could use him as a guest in my classroom. He was an intelligent young man with insightful and knowledgeable views on Soviet history. He was open minded enough even in high school, to realize that the government was controlling the information he learned.*

Roy was disarmed by his informant's candor:

> *In learning about her ideas of our culture, she expressed much of her own. (She) felt that many young Americans are cold and seemingly unfriendly at intimal contact.*
>
> *When discussing human rights, (she) explained that Americans say too much and that we have our own problems to correct before we criticize other concerning human rights. This discussion surprised me because she still felt obligated to defend her home land, but understood that coming to America showed her how much more outspoken and free you are to express what you feel.*

This new information would be used in the next stage of the process to assess the validity and reliability of the information.

Stage 3--Adult (remembering/comparing story)

After the interview is completed, the interviewer is compelled to seek additional information that will clarify and expand the

data gathered in the interview itself. In Sara's case this project sent her back to her own family to do research, not on any facts from her Finnish friend, but to seek parallel stories from her own background in the South.

Roy, on the other hand, felt that this project had *"reaffirmed much of the prior knowledge of China that I knew, given validity to it."* To further explicate how he was making comparisons between his experience with oral history and this prior knowledge, he went on:

> *Most of this discussion (about media) reaffirmed my understanding of the Chinese government's desire to suppress what its people see and hear, but what surprised me was the people understanding that this suppression is going on.*
>
> *I was taught growing up that religion is looked down upon in China. She explained how before she came to America she had no religion and that the churches she knew about were private and practiced behind closed doors.*
>
> *Most of the books I have read on China are not recent enough to express these (economic) changes not do they talk of the social historical aspect of Chinese culture. Oral history is thus excellent in its expressions of social history while at the same time is like having news hot off the presses.*
>
> *When I was able to make connections with the material I had learned, it took on a new meaning, making me desire to learn more.*

Both Matt and Al made references to their need to do further research on the history and geography of their informant's homeland in order to better relate their stories and know what questions *"to ask in any future interviews...and I hope there are more."*

Stage 4--Elder (sharing stories)

An oral history is not complete until it is shared with others. The Native American story circle metaphor considers it essential. The follow up reporting of the projects was dictated by the confines of the class structure, but each student responded differently to the possibilities. As they talked about their personal experiences with oral history, they also reflected on how they might apply this methodology with their own students in the future.

As Matt related, *"I know I'll do it again. It was such a good experience for me. More learning is done outside the classroom than inside."* Thinking about possible applications to the classroom he remarked, *"I would use some of the information I learned in lessons on immigration and naturalization, WW II, life in Holland, geography of Europe, family holidays, traditions, and rituals."*

Similarly, Al envisions a simulation exercise where students are told that a former member of the Red Army is visiting and they must prepare a set of questions for him about his homeland.

Sara was not as concerned with specific classroom applications

as more personal reactions to oral history. She voiced *"frustration in not being able to share all she learned."* She sees herself using oral history as a basis for historical fiction, particularly based on her own family's stories:

> *I want to use oral history to show people history is made up of the lives of ordinary people, sometimes facing extraordinary events, but generally just ordinary people doing ordinary things.*

Roy combines both the classroom and personal in his reflections:

> *Lesson ideas could be expressed on the recent economic changes, thus proving China's desire to modernize. I enjoyed this project because it reaffirmed much of my knowledge of China. Had it not been for this interview, I would still be carrying many falsehoods about China and wondering if what I had been taught was true.*

From field notes kept by the course's professor, the same four stages of the story circle evolve, *"all seemed to have enjoyed the experience, though they may not have thought so in advance. One more assignment, too much trouble, pain to find interview."* They found a variety of ways of getting interview...friends, work associates, classmates, family, International student office of College. [Stage 1]

Many combined both content and personal and were able to tie together many aspects of thought. Some seemed overwhelmed by all that they had learned about content and personal aspects. It made them sad, made them happy, surprised them by the deeply personal stories that were related, in some cases by people they had known socially and never really "known". [Stage 2]

Each student remarked on how they needed/wanted to do more research on the topic for their own edification, as well as to develop into lesson plans. *"They don't realize it but they are starting to think like teachers and researchers, not just students doing an assignment."*[Stage 3]

Stage 4 is harder for the field notes, because it was the actual assignment. Students were given a specific end result to achieve. In their conversations, however, one could tell that there was much more going on. Oral history as a viable pedagogical tool was being ingrained in their repertoire. As Ron stated in class, *"I loved doing this. I know my students will too."*

Looking back on the entire project, the professor's field notes reflect his enthusiasm for what occurred:

> *All students reported a high degree of enjoyment and satisfaction with this assignment. There were no complaints about the amount of work or time required to complete it. In fact, it was seen as one of the most beneficial elements of the entire methods course. Because the interviews themselves took different paths, it is difficult to compare findings. Some students spent most of the interview discussing the immigration experience, others life in the native country or reactions to life in small town USA. Students reported*

increased understanding of the historical context of their topic. They saw themselves as being more aware and sensitive to the situation of someone who was considered by many to be "different." In all cases, they discovered things they never had considered about the person, place, or topic.

In addition, the students reported learning much about themselves. Their responses to a stranger--someone from a completely different culture--were varied and enlightening. "I was surprised at how stereotypic and biased my expectations were." " Who knew we had so much in common?" "Why did I get so nervous, he was just a man...?"

V. Concluding Remarks

The key question of this study was to describe how the interviewer is changed by the process of interviewing. The study supports changes in the interviewer as described by the four stages of the story circle.

Students are seen as developing a broader understanding of their subject. They are able to improve their thinking, writing, and analytical skills. As Ritchie (1995) says, "Oral history challenges their preconceived notions and makes them rethink how they research and analyze." (182)

This study supports what Ritchie and others are saying about historical thinking as an illustration of the depth that is called for in the National Standards (1994). Students are questioning their previous knowledge and adding a human element to their analysis. They are seen as realizing that the personal response to historical events may not be parallel to what had been read in texts.

Most importantly, they were led to see that no story is complete until it is told. Each person they interviewed, though seemingly normal and unimportant on the exterior, possessed numerous insights and tales that cried out to be shared with others. The students learned that we all benefit from the experiences of every other person. We are all part of the circle.

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